

Castlemaine Naturalist

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Monthly newsletter of the
Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.



Gibberbird

- Photo by Nigel Harland

Birdsville Track – September 2010

Nigel Harland

This is the third time I have been looking for the Grey Grasswren and the third time I have failed. The first time was ten years ago and I was the only person on the trip not to see it. The second time was last year, the country was so dry and the wind so intense that I couldn't see the lignum very well, let alone a bird hiding in it. This time the country was so wet that we couldn't reach the birding site, let alone look for it. Despite that, this was one of the best birding trips I have been on and I can go again one day, and perhaps find it!

We left Waikerie on a Friday in mid September and arrived at Lyndhurst in mid afternoon. The road is sealed all the way to Lyndhurst but the greenness of the country was the only indication of what was to follow. We made our way 25km along the Strzlecki Track to a site where I had glimpsed a Chestnut-breasted Whiteface ten years ago. After a short time we came across Thick-billed Grasswrens and experienced terrific views, better than I have had before. Moving on we suddenly encountered a small flock of Whiteface and realised they were Chestnut-breasted. They settled less than 20m away and we were transfixed! They moved on to a creek bed and settled again. I tried photographing them this time, but my technique is not great – at least I have a good memory! Cinnamon Quail-thrush and more Thick-billed Grasswren on the way home made for a perfect day.

The next day involved driving to Goyder's Lagoon at the northern end of the Birdsville track. We had learned that the Frome Creek, which crosses the Birdsville Track just north of Marree was running nearly a metre above the road and there was no chance we would get over at that depth. Fortunately when we arrived it was only 60cm deep! There was quite a bit of traffic coming from the north. The Birdsville races crowd were coming back after a fruitless venture. We watched a few vehicles coming through and then ventured ourselves. The crossing was nearly 100m long, but we eventually made it. The track after that was extremely wet, but nothing like the Frome crossing. All of a sudden the normally red centre was green with a myriad of colour, being the normally dormant flowers. Yellow, purple, orange and white dotted amongst the green background.

The normally dry Cooper Creek was over a kilometre wide, so a diversion was in place, taking the track an extra 30km eastward to a spot where a small ferry plied its trade – one car at a time. We eventually got back onto the main track and found our way to the Mungerannie pub, which was our accommodation for the night. It was around 2pm and we were still 200km short of the Grey Grasswren site. Our advice from the pub was not to try, but we were keen and headed off. After numerous patches of water over the road, we came across one that appeared to have no end! It had taken us half an hour to travel less than 15km so we agreed that discretion was the better part of valour and we retreated.

On our way back we discovered some sand dune country, so stopped to look for Eyrean Grasswren. After quite a short time we found two birds on the top of low bushes about 30m away. They popped up and down, but gave us really good looks. You never bring your camera for opportunities like this! Back to the Mungerannie pub for both celebration and regrets. We had no chance to try for the Grey Grasswrens the next day since rain was forecast and if the road was closed we had no chance of getting out for a few days. So we left before 6am and had to wake the guys who were operating the ferry across the Cooper. Back to the Frome Creek, which was only 40cm deep this time and home to Lyndhurst, having found a Rufous Fieldwren on the way.

We had one day left and there was a possibility of driving up the Strzlecki Track some 250km to a possible nesting site of the Letter-winged Kite. The track was open for 4WD vehicles, so early to bed for a 6am start. Bad news the next morning as there had been another 10mm of rain. There was a possibility that the track would be closed, but not by that time in the morning. Should we go or should we wait until news of road closures came through? There were hefty fines for driving on closed roads, but it wasn't closed – yet! So we went. The first 25km was incredibly wet and we considered turning around. We then hit a bit of bitumen and by the time we were back on dirt, things seemed a lot drier – the rainfall had been localised. By the time we reached the Letter-winged Kite site it was time to take our jumpers off – almost!

There were two possible locations and we searched the first one with no luck. On to the second site which was about 1km off the road. There were only half a dozen trees and our first search was fruitless. Then one kite emerged and we immediately saw the black “lettering” under the wings, which identified it as a Letter-wing as against a Black-shouldered Kite. In no time at all, there were four birds, seemingly one adult and three juveniles. They remained very localised to the tree they emerged from and occasionally perched on the dead limbs of nearby trees. I did have a camera this time and got some acceptable if not spectacular shots. We stayed a while, but not too long, leaving them to their own environment and relative solitude.



Back to Lyndhurst and relief that the road had never been closed – it could have been as we didn't see another vehicle all day. On the way we stopped for a break and managed to find our last speciality – a male Gibberbird – so close, the photos weren't at all bad! Next day, back to civilisation with memories that will last a very long time.

September Excursion Report – Youngman's Track

Lisa Minchin with the assistance of Rita Mills

As a recent arrival, one of the things I love about living in Castlemaine is how quickly you can find yourself in the bush. Saturday's excursion to Youngman's Track was a great reminder of this as we drove past the burgeoning KR Castlemaine factory complex (Wow – it is much bigger than I thought it would be!) and turned with relief into the surrounding grey box-stringy bark forests. We parked slightly off the road on a hill a short distance along Youngman's Track. Stepping out of the car and looking down the valley was a wondrous sight of green grassy understory, bright mosses and yellow wattles (Gold Dust Wattle *Acacia acinacea*, Golden Wattle, *A. pycnantha*, Rough Wattle *A. aspera*) as well as heavily flowering Gorse Bitter-pea *Daviesia ulicifolia*. On closer inspection clumps and then larger patches of Greenhoods became apparent including Nodding Greenhood, *Pterostylis nutans*, Blunt Greenhood *P. curta*, Dwarf Greenhood *P. nana* and Tall Greenhood *P. melagramma*. Other orchids to be seen included Leopard Orchid *Diuris pardina* and Gnat Orchid *Cyrtostylis reniformis*.

Unsurprisingly after all the rains of recent weeks, navigating across the rocks down and up the slope whilst trying not to step on any of the beautiful herbs was a challenge. The moist habitat gave rise to a small number of Billy Buttons *Craspedia variabilis*. Also in flower were: Early Nancy *Wurmbea dioica*, *Hardenbergia violacea*, Tall Sundew *Drosera peltata* ssp. *auriculata*, Scented Sundew *D. whittakeri*, Pink Bells *Tetradlea ciliata* (just in flower), Tall Riceflower *Pimelea linifolia*, *Hovea heterophylla*, White Marianth *Rhytidium procumbens*, Fairy Waxflower *Philotheca verrucosa*. Necklace Fern was also found.

We did not lack for fauna. Chris Timewell managed to catch a skink which he subsequently identified as Bougainvilles Skink *Lerista bougainvillii*. A scorpion was found curled up underneath a nearby rock. Although generally quiet, there were a few birds about including White-winged Choughs, Grey Currawong, female Scarlet Robin and Spotted Pardalotes. Thornbills, fairy-wrens and ravens were also heard nearby. A Varied Sittella was identified by Marjory Cross amongst a mixed flock of small birds that she saw when she walked down to the end of the side track where a couple of cars were parked.

Rita introduced some of us novices to Miner's Lettuce *Claytonia perfoliata* – such an interesting and attractive looking plant as weeds so often are. According to Gardening Australia, Miner's Lettuce, a North American native, was eaten in the Californian Gold Rushes to stave off scurvy. One could speculate that it was introduced here for the very same reason. The fact sheet goes on to say: 'It has a rounded succulent-like leaf and a tiny white flower that sits in the middle of the leaf. It makes a wonderful addition to a salad and can also be used as a spinach alternative. One of the best things about it is that it grows through winter and spring and will tolerate quite heavy shade.' In any case the habitat description of 'moist bushland' as described in a weed identification guide* could not have been more accurate and it seemed to enjoy the sheltered position under large trees. Perhaps we should all help reduce its expansion by indulging in a little culinary culling?

*FJ Richardson, RG Richardson and RCH Shepherd 2006 'Weeds of the South-East: An identification guide for Australia' RG and FJ Richardson Publishing, Victoria, Australia.



Clockwise from top left: Gnat Orchid, Miner's Lettuce, Hardenbergia violacea, and the scorpion
– Youngmans track - photos by Noel Young.

Yamba and the long Way Home

Rita Mills

Part 3: The Long Way Home Justified

The part of the trip I most looked forward to was from Cunnamulla to Thargominda, visiting Nine Mile Bore, Eulo and Lake Bindigolly on the way there and back, and then from Cunnamulla to Bourke, Mount Hope, Cobar, Hillston, Goolgowie and to Hay - and home.

Last month I took you as far as Eulo, and the Paroo River, which still had a lot of water in it. The flood was well past, but the birds had gathered in numbers. As we drove on, the country looked so different from our previous trips, until we got onto the higher ground which had not had the benefit of flood, and the Mulgas were still looking very sick, with many dead. But it was raining off and on, so much of that country should pick up again now.

Back in 2001 I stayed with friends in the shearing quarters of one of the stations between Eulo and Thargominda, and for me one of the highlights of the stay was a trip out to Lake Bindigolly when the lakes system was full. There we watched flights of what seemed to be hundreds of Cormorants, dozens of Whiskered Terns, and Caspian Terns, plus lots of other water birds and bush birds, so I was really looking forward to much the same sort of thing this time.

We stopped on the bridge, to find that one of my favourite birding sites, the remains of the old bridge approach, had washed away since we were there about five years ago, and a lot of the roadside vegetation had died in the drought, but there were still lots of birds, including Crested, Little Australasian, and Hoary-headed Grebes, Darters, Fairy Martins, Pink-eared Ducks, Whiskered Terns, in fact 17 identified species in about 10 minutes, so I was looking forward to calling in at the lake on the way back so I could spend more time there, which I did. But two days later it was overcast and threatening rain, and very few birds were on the water, and after about 400 metres the walking track disappeared under the water. I decided to follow goat tracks, literally. The result was that I was able to add Plumed Whistle Ducks which were sheltering in the grass at the edge of the water, and a family of White-winged Wrens with a brilliant cobalt blue male to my list.

I was mystified when I was almost back to the start of the walk, by a bird which I described in my note book as 'tiny and having a red vent, and feeding near the ground on a small twin-flowered shrub'. I thought it couldn't possibly be a female Mistletoebird, but that's just what it was. I didn't realize that they fed on anything but mistletoes, and there were plenty around the area. I'm still learning. The shrub I described as having twin white flowers, with yellow drupes, leaves narrow, linear and alternate, and the flowers coming from the base of the leaves. I still can't remember the name I'd been told, but I believe that it is indigenous to that area. Standing and watching that little bird feeding for perhaps 5 minutes was a great treat. The number of species for that second visit, lasting over an hour, was 28.

Our time in Thargominda was very bird orientated too. The flood in the Bulloo River had gone down, but there was still lots of water, and almost continually there were flights of Cormorants (I wrote 'all inland species seen'), Pelicans and Ibis, up and down the river. Our walk on the full day there was along the river and back into the town, and again, in more than one spot, we saw a Great Egret and a White-necked Heron fishing only a few yards apart. We kept disturbing waterbirds as we walked along, and there were many bush birds too; scores of Black-faced, White-browed and a few White-fronted Woodswallows, White-plumed Honeyeaters of course, and lots of Little and Noisy Friarbirds. I also saw my first Red-backed Kingfisher, and was surprised how small it was. I thought they were nearly Kookaburra sized. Another thrill on that walk was a Nankeen Night Heron family, with three striped youngsters scrambling along and over branches on the other side of the narrow stream.

We had lunch at the side of the road up on one of the higher areas between Bindigolly and Eulo on the way back, and found lots of plants growing in the red gravelly soil. There were many new ones with the showery weather, making interesting patterns as they spread out over the soil, and I found one of my favourite Eremophyllas, a mauve flowered one with soft blue-grey leaves. Along with them there were several plants of Rosy Bluebush, which is always a favourite with me.

Two days later as we drove south from Cunnamulla I saw a most beautiful sight; eight Major Mitchell Cockatoos flying with the morning sun shining through their wings. It's a sight I think I'll remember always.

We stopped at the side of the road for lunch a few kilometres into NSW, and I found two of the biggest Cockroaches I've ever seen just wandering along the verge. I took photos of them. One was just plain brown and broad oval in shape, the other had yellow marks each side of the thorax, and was a bit narrower toward the head. I don't think I would like to find either of them in my kitchen!

The special treat at Bourke was finding the Red-tailed Cockatoos having a bit of peace and quiet - temporarily - down by the old wharf, and I tried to get photos of the red in their tails, but they had other ideas about that.

The highlight of our two days in Cobar was finding a shop which sold the most wonderful variety of teas, including proper Orange Pekoe. She sold home-made fudges, too, as well as jams, and other goodies, such as Quandong Chutney, made by women on some of the stations out of Cobar, using indigenous ingredients.

There were still disappointments, though, like finding that the lake at Hillston was full of thistles and feral canola instead of water, as it was in 2001, and that the reed beds near Wanganella are still virtually dry and the reeds look like they are dead, despite the Hay plain being green at the moment. But I think the worst thing was seeing so many goats, with numbers of kids, one nanny with four, from Goondiwindi to Thargominda and Cunnamulla to south of Cobar.

Nevertheless I enjoyed seeing another aspect of the Outback.

Wildflower Walks

Noel Young

Our Wednesday Wanderings amongst the Wildflowers commenced on 15th September with a Wet Weather sortie on the Kalimna ridge. It seemed a little early for many plants, but we found some in flower, such as Tall Greenhood, Golden Moth and Leopard Orchids, Early Nancy, Pink Bells, Downy Grevillea and Purple Coral Pea.

On the second walk 22nd September, we drove to the Maldon railway line at Walmer, and followed it for half a kilometer. As usual this spot was quite productive and although I managed to jot down a list, I'm sure it is incomplete.

As in most places an understory of wattles are still in flower, along with Gorse Bitter Pea, *Daviesia ulicifolia*, Pink Bells *Tetratheca cillata*, Fairy Wax flower *Philotheca verrucosa*, Early Nancy *Wurmbea dioica*, Milkmaid *Burchardia umbellata*, Billy Buttons *Craspedia variabilis*, Creamy Candles *Stackhousia monogyna* (budding), Slender Rice Flower *Pimelea linifolia*, Blue Fingers *Cyanicula caerulea*, Pink Fingers *Caladenia carnea*, Scented Sundew *Drosera whittakeri*, White Marianth *Rhytidosporum procumbens*, Dwarf Greenhood *Pterostylis nana*, Black Anther Flax-lily *Dianella admixta* (budding), and Downy Grevillea *Grevillea alpina*. Geraldine told me that a Dwarf Caladenia had also been seen.

Malcom Calder at the September meeting

Noel Young

Malcom Calder took us on an exotic journey across the Pacific from Tahiti where Cook endeavoured to measure the transit of Venus, to Easter Island and central Chile, where Darwin had explored during his voyage on the Beagle. The well illustrated talk showed us some unusual aspects of South America, from the Atacama desert to the alpine plants of Patagonia. Hooker compiled the flora of the southern lands, establishing that the Fuchsia, Proteaceae, etc., occurred through the Gondwanaland connection. He assumed there had been land bridges, as it was a long time before Wegeners "crazy idea" of continental drift was to be established as fact. The final stages of the break-up saw S America, Australia-NZ and Antarctica still in contact until the late Cretaceous, with the common vegetation at this time including Beech forest and Araucaria (Hoop pine, Monkey Puzzles)

Salt lakes and flamingoes in the Atacama desert (where Peppercorn trees are indigenous), A geyser field at 4000' altitude creates thermal zone vegetation, the spectacular granite and limestone spikes of the Torres del Paine, very hard cushion plants (similar to NZ) in the high Andes, to an island in the Straits of Magellan (wet cold and windy), Black headed Swans in the ocean, Magellanic geese, strange snapdragons, llama-like Guacos, Andean fox, Magellanic Penguins, Torrent ducks, Kelp geese, and many exotic native plants like the Primula, Ranunculus and native strawberry. Altogether an absorbing journey into natural history.

Observations

- ◆ Natalie de Maccus was concerned about the family of Blue Tongue Lizards living under the step; they haven't been sighted since the heavy rain flooded them out.
- ◆ Denis Hurley observed a Sand Goanna being harassed by Choughs in the Little Desert
- ◆ More recently, Denis observed Ravens chasing Kookaburras, and Goshawks possibly nesting around home
- ◆ Noel Young saw several Wattlebirds drive off a pair of Little Ravens
- ◆ George Broadway notes Hardenbergia violacea prolific in the Taradale – Elphinstone area, and that lately Bronzewing Pigeons are seen instead of feral Pigeons at the bird feeder.
- ◆ Shrub Violet still flowering along Erin Court – Debbie Worland

The last of the planned Wednesday Wildflower Walks will be on October 13th but Richard Piesse has generously offered to lead a late outing to the Fryers Ridge area on cup day November 2nd . As this a bit further afield, we will be leaving early at 11.30 am from the usual place. Don't forget to pack a lunch.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club
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Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme

October 2010

Fri October 8 meeting: GRAEME WATSON on Frogs

Sat October 9 field trip: Tamsin Byrnes' property, Pilchers Bridge

*NOTE early start time – 11am at the Duke St car park.

Wednesday, October 13: Last wildflower walk 4pm

Tuesday November 2: (cup day) Fryers Ridge - leader Richard Piesse

*NOTE early start time – 11.30 am at the Duke St car park.

Fri November 12 meeting: ELOISE SEYMOUR- the Moolort Wetlands

Sat November 13 field trip: to be announced

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Denis Hurley's; 20 Merrifield St., at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions for 2010

Ordinary membership: Single \$27, Family \$35

Pensioner or student: Single \$24, Family \$29

Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

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